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SUBJECT: COLOMBIAN MILITARY CIVIL AFFAIRS UNIT PLANS CHANGES

REF: BOGOTA (2006) 10526

Summary

¶1. The Colombian military's civil affairs unit works to win the hearts and minds of civilian populations. A new commander hopes to increase its effectiveness with fresh ideas and additional resources. End Summary.

Winning Hearts and Minds

¶2. The concept of civil affairs in the Colombian military civil affairs has dramatically expanded in recent years. For decades, every branch and level of the Colombian military had a civil affairs unit that focused on small scale infrastructure projects. In 2001, the Ministry of Defense announced a new strategy, entitled Accion Integral ("AI"), to strengthen state institutions and protect the public by coordinating military, political and social activities. The government began implementing the AI strategy in 2003: civil affairs became AI, a general officer took command of the new unit, and an integrated joint staff, with psy-ops specialists and public affairs officers, was created.

¶3. AI works throughout Colombia, but its main goal is building public support for the government in areas where state presence is weak. In 2006 activities focused in the departments of Choco, Norte de Santander, Cauca, Narino and Arauca. AI also has programs to boost troop moral and to encourage deserters from illegal armed groups. AI's main tools are information campaigns, outreach programs, and community projects. Multimedia information campaigns use television, radio, and print to improve the government's image and demoralize illegal armed groups. Most humanitarian outreach programs ("jornadas") involve medical personnel traveling to an area for a short time to establish health clinics. Since 2003, AI has also spent between USD 500,000 and USD one million per year on community projects such as roads, schools, and health clinics.

¶4. AI gradually ramped up its activities between 2004-2006. Personnel increased each year by between 5-10 percent, there are now about 1,200 soldiers in AI. The number of humanitarian outreach programs also went up over the past three years by about 50 percent, while spending rose from USD 750,000 per year to USD 830,000 per year. Military analysts participating in jornadas generally rate them as successful

in raising public confidence in the government generally and the military specifically.

15. AI supports, and is sometimes confused with, the Centro de Coordinacion de Accion Integral (CCAI). CCAI is an interagency group promoting short-term social and economic development in nine "priority" zones where security has recently been established (reftel). The military, including AI, participates in an interagency group that determines CCIA's priorities and programs. About 10 percent of AI's outreach programs in 2006 were done together with CCAI. Still, coordination between AI and CCAI is a challenge. At CCIA meeting on February 19, Vice-Minister of Defense Sergio Jaramillo questioned whether CCAI's priority zones were appropriate and suggested that the group consider other areas as well.

New Directions for Accion Integral

16. AI's new commander thinks AI can do better, especially if it gets additional resources. Captain (scheduled to become admiral in December of 2007) Alberto Bejarano Marin took command of AI in late 2006. He said AI has been handicapped by insufficient resources and is sometimes seen as a dead-end job in the Colombian military. Bejarano also thinks AI suffers from the absence of a consistent strategy: different commands develop projects and disseminate messages in an ad hoc fashion.

17. Bejarano plans to address these problems by changing AI's

command structure to centralize its activities and hiring consultants to create a unified message. The new communications strategy will be in place by March 2007. Bejarano is also reaching out to groups with whom the military has a rocky relationship, including Afro-Colombian and indigenous communities, human rights groups, and the press. He thinks this will help AI identify problems in advance, rather than reacting to situations as they occur. Still, the real difference could be money. Bejarano hopes to receive an additional USD 25 million for construction from the funds generated by the "wealth tax." If AI gets the money, Bejarano says he will add 650 new personnel to form four mobile engineering companies. Construction projects will still include traditional community projects, such as schools and health clinics, but the focus will shift to critical infrastructure (water and sewage systems, roads, and power production and distribution).

Comment

18. The Ministry of Defense may not give Bejarano all the funding he wants: the percentage of the "wealth tax" allocated to AI has steadily shrunk, and the request for construction funding was already cut from USD 50 million. Even if Bejarano gets the increased resources he hopes for, "in-house" construction of this magnitude could bog AI down administratively and distract it from other facets of its mission. Still, AI's goals and methods are consistent with the GOC's focus on using "soft" tools to win over civilian populations. The administration's latest "Strategy for Strengthening Democracy and Social Development" for 2007-2013 says that coordinated civil and military effort is the key to controlling territory, and that political and social actions are more important than military ones. End Comment.
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